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ABSTRACT

With declines in reading skills and increases in the standards for literacy, illiteracy has become a growing national problem. The task of dealing with illiteracy ranges from educating those adults whose basic skills are below the eighth grade level to teaching those who are struggling to learn English as their second language to serving those whose skills need strengthening in order to succeed in vocational programs and academic transfer programs. In fall 1984, Washington's community colleges served 28,724 students in basic skills/developmental education classes, yet it is estimated that only 7% of the state's need for basic skills education is being met. An estimated 69,000 additional students need to be enrolled in basic skills classes in order to make a dent in the illiteracy problem in Washington. The need for increased attention to literacy is underscored by rising standards in business and industry; population changes such as the influx of refugees; the labor intensive nature of literacy training; and the lack of funds for basic skills instruction and programs for volunteer tutors. For the Washington community colleges to make a difference in the fight to reduce illiteracy, the system will have to increase funding for basic skills/developmental education and to increase its instructional effort. Obtaining special funding from tax dollars for basic skills education on a yearly or biennial basis for the next two decades can help the community colleges make a more serious impact on the illiteracy problem. (LAL)

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ADULT ILLITERACY: AN ALARMING PROBLEM

A POSITION PAPER ON INCREASING
LITERACY IN WASHINGTON

By C.L.A.S.

Submitted to:

The Deans of Instruction
The Operating Budget Committee of WACCP

Prepared by Marie Rosenwasser*
January, 1986

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INTRODUCTION

An alarming number of Americans—as many as one fifth of our adult citizens—can not perform at a functionally illiterate level.¹ Twenty-three million adults are not literate enough to fill out a job application, understand instructions on a medicine bottle, or pass a written driver's test. Another thirty-seven million cannot read adequately. While reading skills decline standards for literacy keep rising. Illiteracy is a growing national problem, but it is the kind of problem which can be solved. Community colleges are the institutions to help lead the effort. To do so will require commitment and action.

The three questions this paper raises are: How great is the need for more basic skills education in Washington community colleges? Why does the need continue? What is a solution to the problem? We hope this discussion will encourage you to endorse our request for more funds for basic skills education in community colleges.

HOW GREAT IS THE NEED?

Washington

In Fall, 1984, Washington community colleges served 28,724 students in basic skills/developmental education classes; these were classes ranging all the way from adult basic education to classes which remediate English or math skills and develop students' readiness for college level work. This effort amounted to 14,899 FTE's or 16.8% of the system's total.² It may seem that the community colleges are doing a lot to combat illiteracy, but we are barely making a dent. It is estimated that we are meeting only seven percent of the need.

Twenty three per cent (668,281) of Washington residents 18 years and older have not graduated from high school and 11% (252,309) of our state's adults 25 years and older have not graduated from eighth grade.³ While some of these non-graduates are satisfied with their literacy, many could be more productive employees and citizens if their literacy skills matched today's standards for literacy.

If national figures are true for Washington, 13% or 5,655 students graduate from our state's high schools each year with reading skills lower than those necessary to read a newspaper.

The Washington Community Colleges who assess students English and math skills find that 40-60% of the students do not qualify for College English and Math.⁴ If 40-60% of our currently enrolled students read below the twelfth grade level, and we are serving only 28,724 students in ABE/ESL, Adult High School, GED and college preparatory classes, we need to enroll an additional 69,000 students in basic skills classes.⁵

Nation

According to national estimates, not only one in five but even one in three adults cannot read and numerate sufficiently to function in our increasingly sophisticated society.⁶ One out of nine adult Americans cannot read at all, 30% of the naval recruits are functionally illiterate, one out of every ten drivers had to have the driver's exam read to them orally, 85% of all juvenile offenders are illiterate, 65% of all prisoners are illiterate, one out of three mothers receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children cannot read, one-fourth of all army recruits are put into remedial classes so they can understand training manuals written at a seventh grade level; 75% of the unemployed do not have the basic reading skills to be trained for high-tech jobs, and 40% of today's American adults say they never read a book. The United States ranks 49th among 156 United Nations countries in literacy; this is a drop of 18 places since 1950; the rate of illiteracy in the U.S. is three times that of the Soviet Union and five times that of Cuba.⁷ Each week 44,000 adults join those classified as illiterate. Each year 2.3 million people are added to the ranks of the functionally illiterate. Thirteen percent of the nation's high school graduates cannot read and write beyond the sixth grade level.

WHY DOES THE NEED CONTINUE?

We know more today than ever before about the number of functionally illiterate partly because the media publicizes the problem and partly because community colleges are assessing students' skills as they enter college or specific programs. While the open door is still open, it is becoming common for colleges to have entrance requirements for technical and academic programs that require relatively sophisticated thinking, communication, and computation skills.

Other reasons for attention on literacy can be found in our increasing expectations. Standards in business and industry have increased; there is less tolerance for incorrect communication, particularly as the job market becomes more technical and more competitive. We expect our citizenry to be more literate than what was accepted 40 years ago; by the year 2,000 Americans will

need greater reading skills than every before, but fewer Americans will have them--unless we increase our efforts.

Changes in our population also account for the increased need for more and better basic skills education. The influx of refugees from Southeast Asia, Cuba, Eastern Europe, and Central America has meant that our high schools and community colleges are welcoming large numbers of adults who are struggling to learn English; these numbers swell by 1.3 million annually. While federal dollars have funded millions of hours of language training for most of the refugees, the number of hours is insufficient for the quality of English proficiency our new citizens need to compete successfully for jobs and to become fully functioning American citizens. Community Colleges realize this need more than universities or public schools because most of the adult refugees/immigrants are in our adult education classes.

Besides size, there are other dimensions to the problem. Literacy training is labor intensive; tutoring and coaching individuals or small groups of students must accompany large group instruction. Yet in 1986, Washington community colleges will have a funded student/faculty ratio of 32 to one. With a ratio like this we have little right to expect serious reduction of illiteracy. Helping adults become competent in the basic skills requires trained and dedicated faculty, individual attention, tutors, counselling, advising, tracking, special technology, and time. We are paying for only a small part of this right now.

We expect volunteer tutors to make a difference, but unless SB3517 passes, we do not even have funds to coordinate the volunteer tutoring. We admit that students with low literacy skills need more counselling, advising, and tutoring; but we fund none of these services at a rate that can make a significant difference. We know that effective instruction in basic skills requires especially competent, well trained, and committed faculty; yet we have spent little to retrain faculty. In fact, about 80% of basic skills instruction is accomplished by part-time instructors. We rely on volunteer professional associations and faculty willingness to retrain, but the retraining thus far is inadequate. We expect adults to use computers and we contend that computer technology can be a great asset in the teaching of basic skills; yet we do not provide computers for the basic skills classes at the rate we provide them for the business and technological classes. In addition, recruiting illiterate adults is harder and more expensive than recruiting high school students who are primed for college or working adults who want to retrain.

Finally, we should realize that if basic skills education requires more services such as recruiting, advising, tutoring, counselling, monitoring, tracking, and faculty development, this education will require administration; yet we provide less administration for basic skills programs than for other parts of the curriculum.

HOW DO WE SOLVE THE PROBLEM?

For the Washington community colleges to make a difference in the fight to reduce illiteracy, the system will have to increase funding for basic skills/developmental education. This additional funding needs to include earmarked dollars for volunteer coordinators, recruiting, advising, counselling, and direct instruction. The current proposal to pay part-time coordinators for volunteer tutors acknowledges the need for special funding, and it can help the community colleges and literacy organizations reduce illiteracy; but the impact will be small. Additional FTE's for developmental education should be funded. If the system served twice as many students in the same number of basic skills credits the current 28,729 students take, it would serve 57,458 students and generate 29,798 basic skills FTES. At an average variable cost per basic skills FTE of \$1,741,⁸ these additional FTE's would cost \$51,878,318. If the system provided even one five credit basic skills course for the estimated 50% of our students not qualified for English and Math 101, it would need to serve approximately 40,134 more students than we served in basic skills classes Fall, 1984 and would generate an additional 4,459 annual FTE's at a cost of \$7,763,119. While these numbers seem large, they underscore the magnitude of the problem. They suggest a need both for some reallocation of current resources and additional FTE's for basic skills education. Ten percent of these additional 4,459 FTE's would cost \$776,311. While 51 million or seven million dollars for basic skills education may not be possible, we may be able to obtain \$700,000 over the next few years. Even half of this amount in the 1987-1989 biennium would be one small step forward in the struggle to increase literacy.

If state funds are not available, what other sources of funding might be used? Currently, community colleges fund basic skills education with federal adult and vocational education dollars in addition to the state funds. Of total instructional costs about 87% are funded with state dollars; the remaining 13% comes from a combination of special grant funds such as Title III and the federal adult and vocational education funds.

While we would like to propose an alternative for funding basic skills education that would not include a significant increase from the state funds, we cannot do so. Relying on more federal funds seems wishful thinking, but colleges will undoubtedly continue to seek special grants for basic skills education; they will continue to use part of the vocational and all of the adult education funds for literacy training. The only viable alternative is special funding for basic skills/developmental education from our tax dollars.

CONCLUSION

The illiteracy problem ranges from educating those adults whose basic skills are below eighth grade to those who are struggling to learn English as their second language to those whose skills need strengthening in order to succeed in vocational programs and academic transfer courses. The Washington community college system can do more to increase literacy, if we secure additional funds for basic skills education. Each year the number of functional illiterates in Washington increases. If we want to make a real impact, we need to increase our instructional effort. Obtaining special funding for basic skills/developmental education on a yearly or biennial basis for the next two decades can help community colleges make a more serious impact on the illiteracy problem.

REFERENCES

- * The following people were instrumental in providing data for or reviewing this paper: Sandy Wall, SBOCE Intern; George Delaney, Dean of Instruction, Skagit Valley Community College; Robert McFarland, Dean of Instruction, Highline Community College; Joyce Hopps, Dean of Instruction, Everett Community College; Robert Evans, Dean of Instruction, Olympic Community College; and C.L.A.S. representatives: Pam Arseneault, Highline Community College; Gary Higashi, Grays Harbor Community College; Ted Keaton, Everett Community College; Bob Lawrence, Green River Community College; and Greg Golden, Edmonds Community College.
- 1 "Functional Illiteracy" refers to an adult's inability to read, write and numerate at a level of literacy necessary to perform tasks and assume responsibilities expected of adults. The degree of literacy required varies with the nature of a job and responsibility. A twelfth grade reading level is needed for many of today's technical jobs; thus, adults' literacy skills need to be higher than in the past. In this paper, "functional illiteracy" shall refer to all levels of illiteracy below college level.
- 2 CLAS Research, Fall 1985. Total headcount for Fall, 1984 was 137,716 (including state and contract; excluding community service, waivers, senior citizens).
- 3 1980 Census Report.
- 4 In her fall, 1985 survey of all 27 Washington community colleges, SBOCE Intern Sandy Wall learned that 2/3 of our colleges have some form of assessment and 1/3 of them use assessment results to place students into English and math classes.
- 5 This assumes a total headcount of 137,716 as noted above.
- 6 Kozol, Illiteracy in America, 1985.
- 7 Knight Foundation, ABLE Primer, 1985.
- 8 The variable cost for basic skills FTE includes \$1,268 for direct instruction and \$473 for instructional support, per SBOCE staff member Sherrie Story.